

# Book Review: Leaving Academia: A Practical Guide by Christopher L. Catherine

*In Leaving Academia: A Practical Guide, Christopher L. Catherine provides practical advice for those considering changing careers. Eryk Walczak finds this book a great read for both early-stage PhD students who might want to prepare a Plan B and more seasoned academics considering working in non-academic roles.*

*This review originally appeared on [LSE Review of Books](#). If you would like to contribute to the series, please contact the managing editor of LSE Review of Books, Dr Rosemary Deller, at [lsereviewofbooks@lse.ac.uk](mailto:lsereviewofbooks@lse.ac.uk)*

**Leaving Academia: A Practical Guide. Christopher L. Catherine. Princeton University Press. 2020.**

Covid-19 has [worsened](#) an academic job market that was already tough before the pandemic. The Royal Society's 2010 [report](#) demonstrated that becoming a professor is very unlikely for the majority of students embarking on a PhD programme in the sciences. So what are the options outside of academia and how can one get a foothold? Christopher L. Catherine, a classicist turned communication specialist, provides [a new guidebook](#) for PhD students and academics preparing to leave academia.

Leaving academia can be hard for people who have never held a position outside of the university system and who have planned to spend their lives working as professors. Catherine was in this position himself and takes readers on a journey which traces his mistakes, learning processes and, eventually, how he found solutions. The author frames the process of leaving academia around six D's: dread, discern, discover, decipher, develop and deploy. Each chapter provides a large dose of the author's introspections which might seem familiar to others preparing for a career change.



*...there is no such thing as an “alt-ac” career: academia is the alternative path*

The first feeling, dread, is probably common as the unknown awaits. Catherine suggests undertaking a realistic assessment of the pros and cons of staying in academia. He starts by dissecting his own motivations. Was pursuing the academic dream job really the best option available or was he struck by a sunk cost fallacy which made him persevere because of the already invested resources? In this case, the epiphany came when Catherine's wife was offered a permanent position at a peripheral US college. Facing a dilemma common to academic couples, a two-body problem, where the difficulty of finding an academic position is compounded by the need of a significant other to do the same, Catherine decided to jump ship. Thus he embarked on a mission to learn about the workings of the non-academic world.

*Upon leaving academia, five areas of your personal and professional life return to your control: location, people, career trajectory, salary, and meaningfulness of your work*

The author discerns the thinking patterns which held him back from leaving and how he had to think about himself from a new perspective to find a position outside of academia. He guides us through his self-discovery and provides tips which worked for him. Many pages are devoted to discovering potential options, mostly through informational interviews and networking. Informational interviews are an approach that involves reaching out to unknown people to find out about their work. Once a rapport with interviewees was established, supposedly simpler than expected, the author would ask for an introduction to another person when the interview was finished. Although networking might still be a dirty word for some academics, Catherine explains that it is crucial for finding out about potential opportunities in the unknown world of businesses, non-profits or the wider public sector. Additionally, conducting these conversations served a purpose of preparing for the actual job interviews.

The book does not provide much information about defecting from fields which allow a wider range of exit options: for example, computer science or economics. Researchers in these fields are likely to find it easier to switch to non-academic roles which might resemble academia. So-called alternative academic ([alt-ac](#)) positions might be available in technology companies or governmental departments.

Even though the author admits that the context of his book was meant to be 'internationalised' by the editors, it still felt rather US-centric. Many developments in academic employment described in the book can also be observed in Europe. Junior academics in many European countries are offered more secure employment than their equivalents in the US, but a wide [variety](#) of academic job markets exists.



Not all PhDs are seen as equal by employers, but the prestige of universities is glossed over in the book. Research shows that [obtaining a PhD from a highly reputable institution](#) leads to [better chances of landing an academic position](#). There is a hint in the book that leaving a research-intensive institution might lead to more promising careers in the private sector as well. I wish that more hard numbers were provided, but the author's take is rather qualitative, based on interviews with a number of ex-academics. This approach might suit some readers, but I would prefer to see the data about the state of the academic job market and the alternatives.

Catherine writes that his process of searching for a non-academic job made him realise the peculiarities of academia, especially the working conditions that would not be acceptable in a non-academic professional context. Catherine's passion for the issues faced by the precarious faculty is evident on the pages of this book. Before leaving academia, the author was also a representative of a contingent faculty. He offers unorthodox advice on quitting an academic job even mid-term if an outside option appears, believing that this is the only way to improve the working conditions of the academic precariat. Short-term contracts and low salaries of the junior faculty seem to have finally been noticed even [outside](#) of academia.

Catherine explains how PhD students possess skills that are already valued outside of academia but these need to be packaged correctly. Pursuing a PhD should provide a preparation for careers involving writing, presenting or project management. These are skills highly valued in non-academic settings, but they should be presented as such by adjusting the format of the CV or cover letters.

This brief book is aimed at everyone considering leaving academia, but I think that those in the humanities might benefit the most from it, given the similarity of potential career options and shared background with the author. This book should be an eye-opener for junior researchers and PhD students alike and I would recommend reading it early in graduate school. *Leaving Academia* can prepare its readers for a potential career change at a later stage

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*Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.*

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